

TREE ACTION NOW

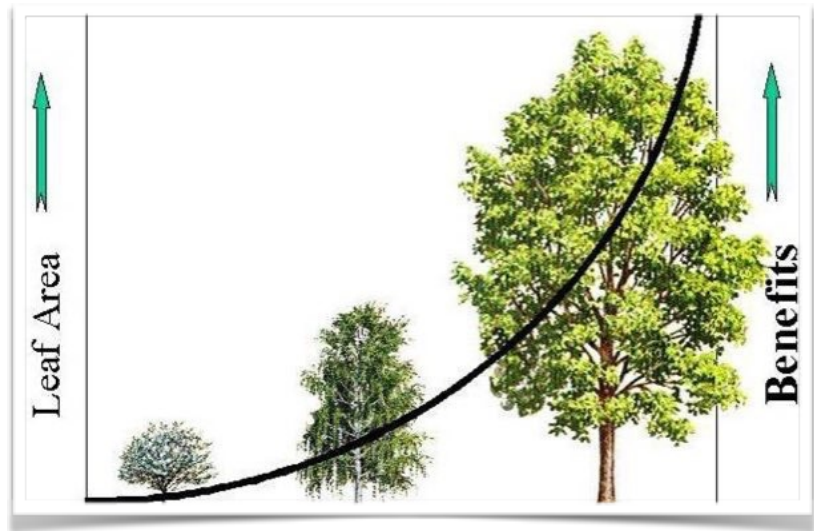
Shaping the Future of Ottawa’s Urban Forest

Priorities of Community Associations for Environment and Sustainability (CAFES), Ottawa, Autumn 2020

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Five Priorities

Trees and tree canopy are a vital part of healthy urban living. While the City has made some progress in protecting and planting trees, we’re not where we need to be to ensure a healthy urban forest for Ottawa’s future. These are our priorities.



1. Ensure that the Official Plan supports the Urban Forest Management Plan and the new Tree Protection Bylaw

The Urban Forest Management Plan (UFMP) is a 20-year plan approved by Council in June 2017, and is one of the most widely consulted policies ever developed by the City. It has strong support from communities, and offers Ottawa’s best hope for achieving key objectives related to climate mitigation and adaptation as well as human health. It also offers scope for achieving greater equity and social inclusion when it comes to **access** to the multiple health and economic benefits of trees, tree canopy and greenspace. As we all know, trees (and appropriate shrubs) save on energy costs, reduce heat islands affecting poorer neighbourhoods and support human health in a myriad of ways. Bigger trees provide exponentially bigger benefits (Figure 1: Tree Benefits Increase with Leaf Area, Dr. Andrew Kenney).

Now, as the City puts finishing touches on the draft of an



In short

The urban forest is the vital green infrastructure we need to offer protection from heat island effects and local flooding that will only worsen as the current climate emergency deepens. Trees in the city support human health and the quality of life for everyone. They sequester carbon, clean the air and water, cool our homes, support habitat and biodiversity, provide food, and foster recreation and education.

Simply put, to ensure the future of Ottawa’s urban forest, our priorities must be to:

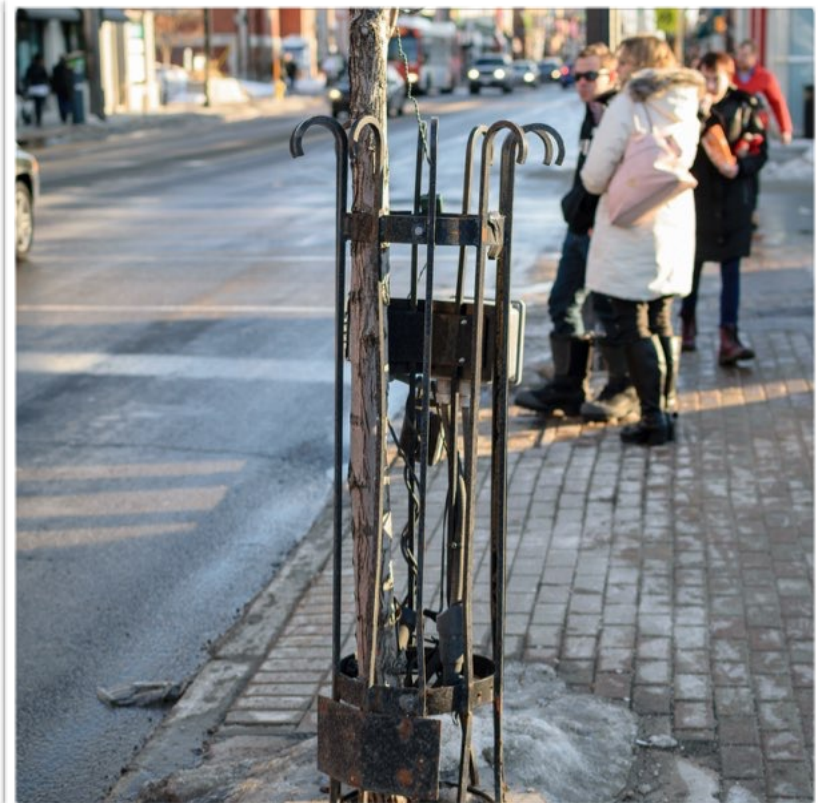
- Protect existing trees and woodlands
- Plant native trees and shrubs to increase tree canopy and native biodiversity
- Achieve equitable and socially inclusive distribution of the benefits of trees
- Enable community tree stewardship
- Improve outcome monitoring and reporting.

Official Plan intended to guide Ottawa’s growth to 2046, we must make sure that the Official Plan provides the strong policy support needed to implement and enforce the UFMP and new Tree Protection Bylaw. This means including in the Official Plan strong policy language needed to drive the changes called for by the UFMP and Tree Bylaw. As other policies also affect trees, the Official Plan must also provide strong direction to the R4 rezoning process and general intensification schemes of the City, to ensure that tree canopy targets are set and met not only for the city as a whole but also for each of Ottawa’s urban neighbourhoods.

We propose to organize a review of the Official Plan draft through the lens of the UFMP and the Tree Protection Bylaw, by asking the question: Does the Official Plan provide sufficient policy support for implementation and legal enforcement of the UFMP and the Tree Protection Bylaw.

2. Take Back the Streets

Ottawa needs to be smarter and more determined about the use of public lands for tree canopy. There is also an urgent need for



effective education and regulation of tree planting on private property. Greater ambition, better communication and budgetary commitments to the use of public lands and public education are needed to take back the streets as a public good.

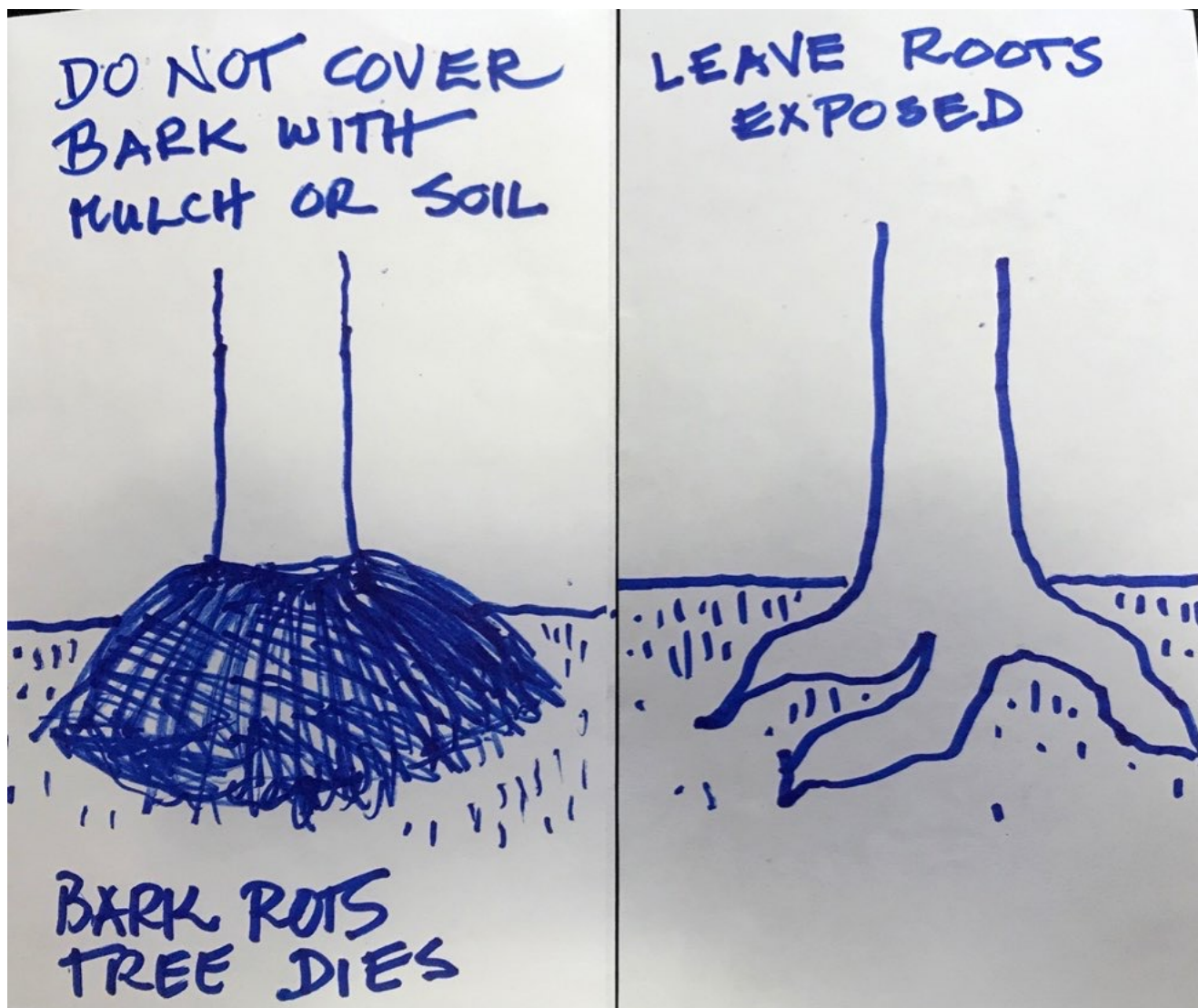
- A. Street rehabilitation and street development must aggressively pursue options to create appropriate space for trees (Figure 2). Steps include making more effective use of the municipal/public Right of Way on the streetscape, narrowing streets and street closures to accommodate trees, rain gardens and bioswales, and uncovering underutilized parking areas and unnecessary hardscaping on fragments of public and private land throughout the city. In addition to its own action on this front, the City should establish a mechanism for residents and community groups to identify specific local opportunities to implement these actions and partner to help fund them (Figure 3: A street closure, depaving and rewilding in Kitchissippi Ward).



B. The chronic conflict between hydro wires and trees must be addressed, with all street renovation projects and new developments giving priority to burying hydro and communication lines. It is a matter of infrastructure resiliency and security for vulnerable people in the face of risks from extreme weather events. Trees under hydro lines are also at greater risk of dying prematurely due to the unbalanced structure of trimmed trees, and poor maintenance by Ottawa Hydro (Figure 4). For this reason, the City must stop planting its own street trees under Hydro lines, and instead negotiate with property owners an appropriate set-back onto private property next to the City's Right of Way.



- C. Strong and well-communicated guidance is needed on the technical standards for tree soft and hardscape planting. This includes attention to below ground soil volume, space allowances needed for flourishing trees and attention to native and near-native tree species. There is no excuse for continuing to allow invasive plant species such as Norway Maple, Japanese Lilac, etc. to be planted in Ottawa. Native and near-native species of trees and shrubs are available for virtually all landscaping applications and provide critical food sources and habitat for beneficial insects, birds and mammals.
- D. At present, landscaping companies are not required to use licenced or regulated professionals and have no oversight from any quarter other than the client. Many have no formal training at all. Too often, landscaping partly buries tree trunks under soil and mulch, leading to serious damage and eventual loss of trees (Figure 5). Invasive tree species and exotics are routinely planted when better-adapted native species are available. The City must immediately regulate the landscape and nursery industries so as to correct practices that undermine native biodiversity and threaten the future health of trees and the urban canopy.



- E. Better education and oversight of demolition and excavation for new infill projects and landscaping plans are needed to give retained mature trees a better chance of survival (Figure 6). Too many “retained” trees die a few years after infill development due to poor construction practice and underestimates of the rooting zone needed. Even when replaced, the loss of a mature tree also represents the loss of many decades of ecosystem services and carbon sequestration (from the UFMP: “as trees grow in size and their canopy and leaf area increases, the amount and value of the benefits and services they provide increases exponentially. This makes the urban forest one of the only municipal infrastructure assets that actually increases in value as it ages.”



- F. The Trees in Trust and other City [tree planting programs](#) (follow link) must be more insistent on the need for residents to plant trees on their property, especially in front yards where the benefits of shading are shared by all. We cannot afford to be passive about this public good. At present, the programs lack ambition and are timidly communicated. Engagement with institutions such as schools and hospitals is also critical, because the tree canopy in these areas is known to be inadequate and needed to bring benefits to all sectors of the population. Much more attention also needs to be given to promoting planting and harvesting of fruit trees as an integral part of the urban food forest and food security in the context of increasing vulnerability in the food supply (Figure 7).



3. Implement and Enforce the Tree Protection By-law

The new Tree Protection Bylaw combines the earlier bylaw for trees on private property in urban areas with the bylaw for municipal trees, and introduces new policies. It does not apply to trees on private property outside the urban area.

Some of the proposed changes will come into effect January 1, 2021, while others are as yet unscheduled. In our view, the City should speed up and better fund implementation.

- A. The delay in implementation of proposed changes in the diameter of protected trees (from 50 cm DBH to 30 cm DBH) leaves trees vulnerable to pre-emptive cutting by property owners trying to avoid the bylaw. While the delay is regrettable, Councillor Catherine McKenney's efforts in June led to this key element of the new bylaw being included in changes effective January 1, 2021.
- B. The revised bylaw requires significant new staffing for conservation officers able to review tree permit applications, mitigate impacts on existing trees and deny permits when necessary. Critically, the City's Legal Department needs to defend the bylaw and prosecute violations, something it has not forcefully committed to in the past.
- C. The Tree Protection bylaw is the City's only legal instrument for retaining trees in the urban area. Unfortunately, decisions on tree removal permits are made at the lot or single-property level. This must change so that applications for removal of individual trees are linked to neighbourhood tree canopy targets. This would provide a legal mechanism for denial of a tree removal permit when removal would lead to a drop below the neighbourhood threshold. Otherwise, there will be little scope for turning the corner on meaningful protection of mature trees in the urban forest. CAFES and the Greenspace Alliance lobbied for this action last winter, championed by Councillor Shawn Menard's office on behalf of the City's Environment Committee. We continue to press for an update from staff on this addition to the bylaw.
- D. At several times in the past the City established Heritage Tree recognition programs, all of which fell by the wayside or were simply forgotten. The Urban Forest Management Plan (UFMP) approved by Council in June, 2017 again called for integration of a Heritage Tree policy into the new Urban Tree Bylaw. Unfortunately, there is no clear timeline for this action or indication of what form it will take. In our view, the most cost effective response now would be to formally adopt the [Forests Ontario Heritage Tree Program](#) as Ottawa's standard, following in the footsteps of the City of Toronto and other Ontario municipalities (Figure 8: Champlain Heritage Oak, photo by Chris Osler).
- E. Guidance on protection of peri-urban woodlands, also promised by the UFMP, is not yet available and there is no clear timeline for addressing this question. When the City approved its Significant Woodlands policy, it established different regimes of protection for woodlands inside the urban boundary and those in the rural area. Inside, any woodland 0.8 hectares or larger, and 60 years old, is automatically recognized as significant and given what protection the policy has to offer (including special provisions for new urban areas brought in through expansion). In the rural area, the provincial guidelines apply, which in practice means only very large woodlands are recognized as significant.

Remaining woodlands are not protected at all and owners are free to do with them what they please. This leaves woodlands in the narrow strip of rural land just outside the urban boundary at risk of being clear-cut as owners try to make their parcels more attractive for urban expansion (and avoid the urban area treatment described above). This issue was recognized by Council and referred to staff developing the Site Alteration bylaw. When the City approved the current Site Alteration bylaw, it included a formal definition of this narrow strip of land, calling it the peri-urban area, and established that it extended one kilometre out into the rural area all around the urban boundary. Provisions of the Site Alteration bylaw that normally apply in the rural area do not apply in this peri-urban area. However, it makes no mention of woodlands and their protection, deferring instead to the forthcoming Tree Protection Bylaw. For that reason, the delay in this section of the Bylaw leaves peri-urban woodlands at risk.



3. More & Better Monitoring and Reporting on the Urban Tree Canopy

- A. The effectiveness of the UFMP, the Tree Protection Bylaw and other policies impacting the tree canopy and access to greenspace can only be understood if and when outcomes are monitored and reported. Despite the obligation to report, very little systematic monitoring and reporting is available to the public. Public complaints and notices of tree bylaw violations seem to disappear into a black hole, adding to the immense frustration experienced by people concerned about the loss of individual trees in their neighbourhoods. It is also disconcerting to realize that to a large extent the City is relying on residents to notice and report on violations, sometimes putting individuals in conflict with their neighbours or the building industry. The City needs to take responsibility for monitoring and reporting, and do it well.
- B. In general, the City needs to pay much greater attention to communicating with residents and industry about trees, tree conservation and tree planting practices and the rules and bylaws governing trees and access to greenspace. The City would not be alone in this endeavour if they were to engage more transparently and actively with the many neighbourhood groups, environmental organizations, amateur nature specialists and groups working with marginalized communities willing to support City leadership on Tree Action Now.
- C. Equity and social inclusion in the distribution of the benefits of trees and tree canopy is of particular concern and should be a key consideration when monitoring and reporting. This lens should also be applied to all of the priorities listed above.

Trees are with us for the long term, creating and maintaining a healthy, sustainable city. They link us to our past and point toward our future. Let's take the opportunity now to protect, plant and heal.

